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Is Disney Surfing the Third Wave?
A Study of the Depiction of Womanhood in Disney's Female Protagonists

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Abstract

It is important to understand factors that have influenced Generation Y's view of womanhood. One way to do this is to analyze third wave feminist messages portrayed by Disney, the media powerhouse. In order to determine if Disney reflects feminist values, the third wave themes portrayed in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1999) are examined. It is concluded that Disney portrays the feminist values of independence and multiculturalism; however, the films are set within patriarchal societies and portray women to be domestic. Ultimately, Disney portrays four messages about womanhood: Women are equal to men; women are different than men; women ought to practice sacrificial love; women should follow their hearts.

Is Disney Surfing the Third Wave? A Study of the Depiction of Womanhood in Disney's Female Protagonists

It's 5:49 a.m. on a Tuesday morning when the alarm clock begins beeping. Twenty-four-year-old Brooke begrudgingly sits up in bed after pressing the snooze button for approximately seventeen minutes. Her bare feet hit the cold hardwood floor, and she moans. With her eyes half open, she fumbles to her closet to face the daunting task of figuring out what she is going to wear.

The closet light flickers on, and asks herself, "Should I wear my gray cardigan with my black pants, or will I be too cold in the office?" All of a sudden, she pauses. "Wait, what day is it? Is it Tuesday? It is! I have a meeting with the executive directors today. Man, that will most certainly win 'The Most Pointless Use of Time' award…Well, at least, Jeremy will be there. Hopefully at lunch he won't bring up the topic of marriage again. I mean, I do love him, but the whole idea of marriage just kind of creeps me out. Me, getting married? That's just weird—I am certainly not ready for that. Okay, Brooke, stop thinking so much. Just grab the gray cardigan and hop into the shower."

Brooke is passionate, ambitious, and impatient. She values control and flexibility and dreams of one day owning her own advertising firm. Furthermore, she is not sure if she is ready to sacrifice her career to get married. Brooke is a Generation Y woman (Bay, 2007).

Generation Y

Defining Generation Y

Generation Y is a group of 70 million American men and women comprised of those born roughly between 1977 and 1994. They are sometimes referred to as

Millennials. According to NAS Recruitment Communications (2006), Generation Yers possess three main characteristics that set them apart from the previous generations: diversity, independence, and empowerment.

Generation Yers live in a unique culture. They were raised in a fast-paced world that depended upon technology to accomplish daily tasks such as school work, communication with family and friends, and entertainment. They were witnesses of the O.J. Simpson trial, the death of Princess Diana, the popularity of boy bands, and the War on Terrorism. They are known as the Look at Me generation (A Portrait, 2007). Words used to describe this generations could be impatient, skeptical, blunt, expressive, image-driven, adaptable, technologically savvy, and multi-tasking. Furthermore, they are the most highly-educated generation to date (NAS, 2006)

Generation Y Womanhood

Generation Y's view of womanhood is significant. A large portion of these individuals are the offspring of feminist activists from the civil rights movement; therefore, this generation has been indoctrinated with the issue of equality since the moment of their birth. Many sociologists have been anxious to study the product of this movement and have found interesting results.

As noted in sociological research, Generation Y is "less traditional" than previous generations (A Portrait, 2007). This generation seems to be content about this change. According to a study conducted in 2006, 60% of Generation Yers do not think that women should return to their traditional roles. One tangible result of this is seen in the age that these women are getting married and having children: two main components of traditionalism. Approximately thirty years ago, the average age for women to marry was

five years younger than it was in 2006. Women are also having children later in their lives. Sociologists agree that this is because these women want to "take care of themselves first" as taught by their mothers (Read, 2006, ¶ 5).

Generation Y daughters noticed how much their feminist mothers sacrificed for their careers in order to gain independence and equality in the workplace. While they appreciate their mothers' fights against discrimination, studies show that Generation Y women plan to live a bit differently than their mothers. They want it all—families, careers, and personal lives—but in a balanced manner. "They look at the big picture in a very strategic way, and make choices and set priorities…' Many watched the 'juggling act' of an earlier generation of working moms and believe they'll find a better way" (Bay, 2007, ¶ 3).

The Objectives of the Study

Sociologists have not been the only people concerned about this generation's definition of womanhood. Psychologists, marketers, activists, and religious leaders have also spent signficant time learning about this and how it relates to their respective fields.

In order to comprehend Generation Y's perception of womanhood more fully, one must analyze the culture that brought it forth. One way to do this is to study the influence of media on this generation. The values, ideas, and dreams portrayed in media during childhood has significant impact in shaping a person. While books, music, and television are significant in forming a child's belief system, studies have found that children process information most easily from video material. In order to understand Generation Y's definition of womanhood today, it is important to analyze the content of frequently watched films during childhood and specifically how it depicts womanhood.

The Walt Disney Company is a powerhouse in contributing to children's media, particularly videos (Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund and Tanner et al., 2003). Media analysts have claimed that the films from this empire specifically have more power to train children about gender roles than public schools, religious institutions and the family (Dundes, 2001). According to recent studies, children watch Disney movies repeatedly. On average, children watch two and a half to three hours of television each day, and research notes that children repeatedly watch movies that they own as much as they watch television. So, in theory, children watch Disney movies for about two to three hours per day (Towbin et al., 2003).

The purpose of this study is to answer two questions: (1) Does Disney reflect Third Wave feminist values in its definition of womanhood? (2)How did Disney portray womanhood to Generation Y during childhood? Therefore, it will examine the values of third wave feminism portrayed in four of Disney's films between 1989 and 1998--specifically the female protagonists in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1999). All sequels will be excluded from this research. This study will then determine Disney's true depiction of femininity. This analysis seeks to encourage individuals to evaluate media messages critically and also to provide insight that will be useful in various fields of study.

Feminism

Defining Feminism

Before discussing the pervasiveness of the third wave of feminism illustrated by the four female protagonists, one must understand the definition and history of feminism. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (feminism, 2009, ¶ 1), feminism is "the belief in

the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes." It is the driving force behind redefining femininity in American society and has consisted of three notable *waves*. The first wave is classified by the campaign for suffrage in the late nineteenth century. The second wave was marked by its fight against social and political discrimination during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, the third wave is known for its opposition against the oppressed or marginalized ideals of gender globally. This wave began in the late 1980s and continues today.

Early Evidences of Feminist Thought

If feminism alters the cultural perspective, one must wonder what was the original state of womanhood. Throughout history, women have experienced oppression and discrimination. They have been defined only by their role in the domestic sphere, had limited access to education, and have been denied basic rights as citizens. In the ancient world, men viewed women as property able to be owned and sold.

However, in the midst of the oppression, there have always been a few voices crying out for justice. History records that in the 3rd century B.C., Roman consul Marcus Porcius Cato tried to restrict women's use of costly goods. This action resulted in an insurrection of women filling the Capitoline Hill and baracading every entrance to the Forum. Shocked at the outburst of the Roman women, Cato shouted, "If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have to become your superiors" (feminism, 2009, ¶ 3).

While the rebellions regarding the state of women have occurred since the ancient world, feminism did not become a noticeable movement until the Enlightenment period during the late 18th-century. Discussion among men resonated claims for liberty, equality,

and natural rights for all social classes. Quickly, women began to realize the hypocrisy of the new philosophy. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Kassian, 1992). She challenged existing ideas and argued that both sexes should be given equal opportunities in education, work, and politics. Wollstonecraft (1792) sought to "persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synoymous with epithets of weakness" (p. 25).

The abolitionist movement also propelled the cause of feminism on a global scale. In the United States, female abolitionists began to relate the campaign's concept of racial freedom to their own lives. In July 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton composed the "Declaration of Sentiments" proclaiming liberation for women with eleven resolutions. The most radical was the right to vote (Kassian, 1992). Soon after, movements for women's equality began; however, they were soon silenced by the Civil War.

The First Wave

At the conclusion of the Civil War, American feminists assumed the inclusion of woman suffrage within the 15th Amendment. The 15th Amendment secured the right to vote to any man regardless of color or previous condition of servitude. When women were not included, it provoked Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, a leading temperance activist, to create the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869.

For several years, women campaigned for the right to vote; however, there soon arose dissension within the movement. While the fight for suffrage was for all women with no regards to class, there arose an "elitist inclination" (feminism, 2009, ¶ 17). The

upper class feminist organizers did not relate with the working-class women or the problems they faced. These women tended to share their allegiance with the trade union movement as opposed to feminism. Soon after, a radical branch broke off of the women's movement. Leaders of this faction challenged the single focus of women's vote and urged a shift to a more wholistic view of liberation much like that of the future second wave.

Resisting the radical ideology, the mainstream first wave continued to vie for the right to vote. One of the most significant contributors to this cause was Alice Paul, who implemented the British suffragettes' methods within the American culture. She employed "shock troops" and "organized mass demonstrations, parades, and confrontations with the police," leaving the ladylike lobbying behind (feminism, 2009, ¶ 20). In 1920, the first wave of American feminism achieved its victory with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, securing women the right to vote.

The Second Wave

The second wave of feminism began in 1963, approximately forty years after the passage of the 19th Amendment. During that timespan, the United States had faced significant turmoil—the Great Depression and World War II—that virtually ended the first wave. Although many women entered the workforce during World War II, they were quickly replaced by males when the soldiers returned home. When the war ended, a new era of domesticity consumed the U.S. In fact, the culture returned to levels of traditionalism that preceeded the first wave of feminism. Women married younger and bore more children than they did at the passage of the 19th Amendment. "Idyllic suburban life" was reflected in television programs such as *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet* (feminism, 2009, ¶ 25).

However, in 1963, one of these housewives reached her boiling point and published a book that is claimed to have propelled the second wave into motion. Betty Friedan was the housewife, and also an American journalist, and her book was *The Feminine Mystique* (Kassian, 1992). On February 4, 2006, she passed away, but her obituary in described the essence of this woman and the impact of her book:

> Betty Friedan, the writer, thinker and activist who almost single-handedly revived feminism with her 1963 book "The Feminine Mystique"… Her insights into what she described as the soul-draining frustrations felt by educated, stay-at-home women in the 1950s, "the problem that has no name," startled a society that expected women to be happy with marriage and children (Sullivan, 2006, ¶ 1-2).

Another factor that deeply influenced the development of the second wave was the civil rights movement and the protests against the Vietnam War, just as the abolitionist movement had triggered the first wave. The civil rights movement drew society's attention to issues of equality and justice. This new wave of feminism turned their focus to issues such as equal pay for women, access to contraception, legalization of abortion, and the prevalence of rape and domestic violence. Second-wave feminists also sought to destroy gender stereotypes that existed in society. This was characterized by the myth of bra-burning (Greenfieldboyce, 2008).

Unlike the first wave, the second wave had many areas of discussion and dissension that branched from the mainstream mission. These discussions brought about many theories about the nature of gender, female oppression, and the role of family. Some radical theorists discouraged romantic relationships between men and women. They insisted that love perpetuated patriarchal oppression. These feminists encouraged women to declare their independence from men by refraining from romantic relations and ending sexual repression. In fact, ending patriarchal oppression was not only a primary

goal of these radical second wave feminists, but they desired to rectify the situation by creating a matriarchal society.

Another radical idea of the second wave feminists was the femininization of God and placing emphasis on metaphysics. Second wave feminists sought to abolish patriarchy; therefore, they questioned why God was deemed to be male. They began speaking about 'Mother God,' and eventually went so deeply into the realm of metaphysics that they began to worship goddesses. However, these goddesses were not an external deity; they were symbols of the individual women. In essence, they began to worship themselves (Kassian, 1992).

While these theories may seem radical, they were more prevalent that one might guess. One significant way that these theories permeated American society was through the growth of Women's Studies program at universities. Young women studied the history of women to highlight the oppressive state and challenge partiarchal norms. Lastly, it was on university campuses that women began being influenced to worship themselves (SDSU, 2006).

The Third Wave

Second-wave feminism reached its climax during the 1960s and 1970s and began waning during the late 1980s, giving way to the third wave. The history and definition of the third wave of feminism is as ambiguous as the postmodern culture that birthed it. Being products of Women's Studies programs, *third wavers* value the political gains made by second-wave feminists. However, they seek to further the second-wave cause while combining a multicultural and multi-issue approach. It defines feminism as relative to each person with his or her own unique experiences. Third wavers no longer focus

solely on womanhood but also campaign on behalf of homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and biracial individuals (Schriefer, n.d.; Third Wave Foundation, 2006). According to Amy Schriefer (n.d.), third wavers celebrate differences between individuals and center all of their efforts around this main concept of individuality. They have reevaluated the second wave's activism and have shifted their focus to embrace all people in all circumstances, The third wavers seek to project all of the voices who have been silenced in the past.

For example, third-wave feminists value the legalization of abortion as achieved by the second-wavers in *Roe v. Wade*, but they think that it was not enough. They seek to understand the hardships faced by different women, as revealed in consciousness raising (c.r.) groups and then personalize the battle for abortion rights (Schriefer, n.d.). The things that they have fought for are the freedoms to choose how and where the abortion takes place. Third wavers have also advocated the formation of post-abortion support groups.

Because the third wave has been birthed during the technology era, it has further revolutionized the growth of feminist theory. Third wavers actively use media and technology to further their message and to highlight how feminism can influence a woman's everyday life. These unorthodox outlets allow their ideology to reach the masses particularly those outside of Women's Studies programs. The Riot Grrrl movement spoke out through song lyrics, web sites, and zines and epitomized this theory production in the early 1990s (Schriefer, n.d.).

Generation Y, the Third Wave, and Disney

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is twofold. Initially, the research seeks to answer if Disney reflects Third Wave feminist values in its definition of womanhood. Then, it will discuss how Disney portrayed womanhood to members of Generation Y when they were children. Therefore, it will examine the four Disney films during the late 1980s through the 1990s that have female protagonists as the central, and title character. These four characters are Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas,* 1995), and Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998).

Method

Qualitative research was conducted on the four films to analyze Disney's depiction of womanhood. Research and documents were first studied about feminism in order to define the central values of each wave of feminism. After reaching a thorough understanding, the researcher watched each film and observed the values and themes about gender roles. Then, a literature review was conducted on feminist critiques of the Disney films. All of these elements were ultimately compiled to derive a comprehensive definition of Disney's representation of femininity.

Summary of Feminist Analysis

Feminism and Disney. The portrayal of gender roles in Disney films has been a significant source of discussion among feminist theorists and analysts. Many scholars in Women's Studies departments have charged The Walt Disney Company with sexism and argued that its stereotypes have filtered throughout their films (Davis, 2005). Second-wave femininists protested the "perfect girl[s]" that permeated the early princess films, such as *Snow White* (1937)*, Cinderella* (1950)*,* and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) (Henke, Umble, Smith, 1996. p. 231).

After the release of *Sleeping Beauty,* Disney did not produce a major motion picture that centered on a female protagonist for another thirty years. In 1989, *The Little Mermaid,* another princess movie, debuted, making waves in the feminist world. Second-wave mothers were appalled by their daughters' newfound adoration of this princess. Peggy Orenstein (2006) commented on this trend,

> The infatuation with the girlie girl certainly could, at least in part, be a reaction against the so-called second wave of the women's movement of the 1960s and '70s, which fought for reproductive rights and economic, social and legal equality. If nothing else, pink and Princess have resuscitated the fantasy of romance that that era of feminism threatened, the privileges that traditional femininity conferred on women despite its costs (¶ 37).

However, it was not long before society noticed that this princess was quite different from her demure, submissive predecessors. She was not content in her world and challenged authority. *The Little Mermaid*'s Ariel established a trend of spunky cartoon protagonists that would continue for approximately a decade. These innovative, independent females, specifically Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan, received much praise from the third-wave feminists. However, the adoration was soon followed by significant criticism.

The values third wavers analyze in media deal with independence, sexuality, predetermined gender roles, equality, multiculturalism, solidarity of all generations of women, rape and domestic violence. Because this wave is penetrated with postmodern ideas of relativity, it is difficult to summarize the admiration and criticism of Disney. However, there were four notable subjects of discussion in regards to the female leads. Third wave feminists praise their independent natures as well as the multicultural and multigenerational emphasis, while they criticize the portrayal of gender stereotypes, and the presence of patriarchal oppression.

Summary of Feminist Analysis: Independence. The new breed of protagonists, introduced by Disney during the third wave, breaks ground by highlighting feminine independence. Not only are Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan title characters, but they also occupy more screen time than their female predecessors (Henke et al, 1996). Third wave feminists praise Disney for revealing the feistiness, the "animation, energy, or courage," of female nature (feisty, n.d, ¶ 1). This feistiness is evident in the characters' love for learning and sense of rebellion (Craven, 2002; Henke et al., 1996; Dundes, 2001; Youngs, 1999).

Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas portray independence through a curiosity and love for learning that is atypical of Disney's female characters. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel expresses a curiosity about human world (Henke et al., 1996). She investigates the remains from a shipwreck and wishes she understood each items' function; therefore, she visits her friend Scuttle, who seeks to answer her questions.

Although Scuttle misinforms Ariel about the purpose of the human fork and pipe, Ariel quickly learns the truth from firsthand experience. Her curiosity (and love for Eric) drives her to sell her voice to Ursula to be transformed from a mermaid into a human. Ultimately, she achieves her dream and displayed her sense of adventure. She leaves the world she knows and sets off to live a new life as a human and wife (Ashman, Clements, and Musker, 1989; Dundes, 2001).

Similarly, Belle also possesses a deep desire to learn. She is the first female character in Disney that reads (Henke et al., 1996; Craven, 2002). In the opening song of the film, the bookseller laughs when Belle asks if he had anything new, since she comes to his store almost every day. She decides to borrow a book that she had read twice,

because it is her favorite (Ashman, Trousdale, and Wise, 1991). Belle also actively embodies independence and the importance of learning by teaching the Beast "how to be civil, gentle, and caring" (Henke et al., 1996, p. 239) Ultimately, Belle reads as a means of experiencing adventure. In fact, as Cummins (1995, pp. 23-25) noted, "the most exiting part of the Beast's castle is its large, well-stocked library" (Craven, 2002, p. 132).

Pocahontas' pursuit of knowledge was embodies by her sense of adventure, much like Belle's (Dundes, 2001). In her song "Just Around the River Bend," she exhibits a courageous femininity that is influenced deeply by a curiosity of what is to come. She desires to experience new things as evidenced by her interest in observing the Englishmen who had come (Pentecost, Gabriel, and Goldberg, 1995). Pocahontas also demonstrates the importance of education in a more powerful way than Ariel and Belle. Like Belle, she assumes the role of teacher. However, she teaches more than an etiquette lesson. Pocahontas instructs John Smith, the Englishmen, and her own tribe about her perception of "nature, power, and peace" (Henke et al., 1996, p. 239).

Not only do these female protagonists assert independence through their curiosity, but they also maintain their feistiness in their rebellion. Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas and Mulan all experience discontentment with cultural norms that drives them to rebel. Ariel dislikes being underwater and being under the authority of her father, which is evidenced by her statement "Betcha on land they understand. Bet they don't reprimand their daughters. Bright young women, sick of swimmin', ready to stand" (Ashman et. al, 1989). She feels like an outcast, and her independent spirit spurs her to trade her voice for legs to win the love of Prince Eric against the orders of her father.

Belle also faces ostracism for being different from the community, and it breeds her dream "of so much more than they've got planned" (Ashman et. al, 1991). The villagers hail her as the "most beautiful girl in town" (Ashman et. al, 1991). However, they think behind her "fair façade, [they were] afraid she [was] rather odd" for reading so much (Ashman et. al, 1991). Henke et al. (1996) stated, "While Belle is aware of their opinions of her, and understands that she is supposed to marry a villager, raise a family and conform, she also knows that she *is* different and *wants* something different" (p.236). Third wave feminists praise this depiction of rebellion that compels Belle not to conform to society's standards (Craven, 2001, Henke et al., 1996). When Gaston, the town's most esteemed bachelor, proposes to her, she does not yield. In fact, she takes insubordination a step further when she ends up falling in love with society's outcast, the Beast. Henke et al. (1996) comments, "Belle's sense of self is strong enough that she refuses to settle for less than a relationship which acknowledges and values her mind, in essence, her self" (p.238).

Although motivated by love, Belle also defies her father's wishes and sacrifices her freedom for the release of her father from the Beast's castle. She bargains with the Beast and sets the terms. She is independent and will do whatever it takes, even if it means rebelling against society or her father (Henke et al., 1996).

Pocahontas evidently challenges society by not being content to marry Kocoum and by avoiding the Englishmen. Her father urges her to follow the path "steady as the beating drum;" however, Pocahontas, like Belle, cannot not reconcile doing what is conventional (Pentecost et. al, 1995). When evaluating her situation, Pocahontas wonders "Should I choose the smoothest curve steady as the beating drum? Should I marry

Kocoum? Is all my dreaming at an end? Or do you still wait for me, Dream Giver just around the river bend?" (Pentecost et. al, 1995).

When Pocahontas seeks what was "around the river bend," she not only rebels against social norms by not seeking marriage to Kocoum, but she also defies cultural boundaries by befriending an Englishman named John Smith (Pentecost et. al, 1995). Henke et al. (1996) described Pocahontas's independent, feisty nature that disregarded all stereotypes:

> Like Belle, she is an active doer, not a passive victim. She also has a savage to tame in the form of an Englishman. Pocahontas introduces John Smith to the colors of the wind and to the mysteries of the world of nature. She takes political stances such as advocating alternative to violence, and she makes choices about her life (p. 240).

Finally, Pocahontas' rebellion against society climaxes when she chooses not to go to England with John, departing from Disney's traditional happily ever after ending. It signifies that she holds all of the power to control her actions. By making this choice to stay with her tribe, Pocahontas expresses an independent sense of self that is not tied to any romantic relationship. This is a "bold stroke for a Disney heroine" (Henke et al., 1996, p. 240).

While Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas oppose their cultural situation, the most apparent form of rebellion is found in Mulan. Mulan, like the previous female protagonists, experiences societal rejection. She is rambunctious, unlucky, and clumsy, and is, therefore, not deemed worthy to be given a husband to preserve her family's honor. Out of her deep love for her father and desperation for finding her true identity, she crosses all social boundaries. She dresses as a man and joins the army in place of her father without his knowing. Because of her independent spirit, "she proves to be a sturdy soldier and a trustworthy companion. In fact, she is primarily responsible for ending the

war. Although she is initially disparaged when her true gender is revealed, her country eventually celebrates her" (Towbin et al., 2003, p. 37).

Third-wave feminists pour accolades on these female protagonists for their defiance and refusal to accept their circumstances. They also praise the social rebellion of Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan for thwarting gender stereotypes by acting heroically at some point during the movies. Throughout the course of the four films, each of the girls at some point saves her male counterpart's life. Mulan not only saves a man's life, but she also saves the entire nation of China.

Summary of Feminist Analysis: Multicultural and Multigenerational Emphasis. Third-wave feminists applaud Disney for creating a new mold of accentuating diversity and placing significance on female mentors. These aspects are seen in Pocahontas and Mulan. Pocahontas is revolutionary because she is a central female character that is non-Anglo (Henke, et al., 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). In fact, "this film contrasts [the Native Americans'] reverence for nature with the English's destructive force on the earth. This may be the first negative portrayal of Euro-American culture in Disney films" (Towbin et al., 2003, p. 37).

Approximately three years after the release of *Pocahontas*, Disney released *Mulan,* which is set in China. According to feminist critics, "In *Mulan*, Asian culture is most presented in a realistic and positive manner, although some negative stereotypic attributes are given to the 'bad guys'" (Towbin et al., 2003, p. 37). This achievement is important to third-wavers. One of their primary goals is to rejoice in differences of lifestyle and culture and welcome those who have been unheard or isolated (Schriefer, n.d.).

Another area of interest for third-wave feminists is the solidarity of different generations of women. They seek to unite all of womanhood; therefore, Disney up until recently has presented a problem (Craven, 2002). According to Henke, et al.(1996), women in Disney's films before *Beauty and the Beast* have been "more often pitted against one another than supportive of one another" (p. 245). However, feminists note that it is not until Pocahontas that camaraderie among women of different generations is portrayed. She "lives in a supportive community of female mentors and friends. She seeks guidance from mother wind, from Grandmother Willow, and from her friend, Nacoma. Each female character has Pocahontas' best interests at heart" (Henke, et al., 1996, p. 245).

Summary of Feminist Analysis: Gender Stereotypes. While third-wave feminists appreciate Disney's depiction of independence within these characters, they condemn its continuation of gender stereotypes. The first areas of criticism are in the appearances and personalities of Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan. Henke et al. (1996) states that from Cinderella to Pocahontas, Disney changes very little physically in their illustration of these women (Craven, 2002). All that changes is the hair color, and with Pocahontas, a slight variation in skin color (Henke et al, 1996).

Not only are these women beautiful, but Ariel, Belle, and Mulan also live in societies that deem a woman's outward appearance of utmost importance (Henke et al., 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). Ariel trades Ursula her voice for a pair of legs and is still able to make Eric fall in love with her without speaking to him (Henke et. al, 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). This is primarily because of her good looks. Additionally, Belle's name actually means "beauty," which her community values about her. Gaston says she is "the

most beautiful girl in town, and that makes her the best" (Ashman et. al, 1991). Finally, in the opening of *Mulan*, Mulan goes to meet the matchmaker who examines her closely not only based on her poise and grace but also her attractiveness (Towbin et al., 2003). She is looking for her to be a "perfect porcelain doll" (Coats, Bancroft, and Cook, 1998).

Furthermore, feminists assert that these characters perpetuate the image of the "perfect girl" in their decision-making capabilities. Disney does not depict these protagonists as people who make decisions based on reason but out of their egocentrism, emotionalism, and "ethic of care" (Dundes, 2001, p. 356). For example, John Smith and Pocahontas defy authorities to stand up for something they believe in. However, when contrasted to the logical way John defies the Governor ("But this is their land!"), Pocahontas's reasoning seems to be a *less* heroic ("I love him!") (Pentecost et. al, 1995). Dundes (2001) analyzes this portrayal and states,

> "Her actions, while overtly heroic, with far-reaching consequences, center around a relationship—her feelings for and urge to protect the object of her love. Pocahontas' wish to maintain peace seems to be a means for her to continue her budding romance. This problem which Pocahontas appears determined to solve is one which threatens to interfere with a relationship, not one which affects the core of society" (p. 356).

Not only do they disapprove of Disney's depiction of the "perfect girl," third wave feminists also protest the characters' stereotypical relationships (Henke et. al, 1996, p. 231). Towbin et al. (2003) conducted a thematic analysis on 26 of Disney's most viewed films to study the depiction of the principles of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation within them. One of the conclusions made was that women are domestic and likely to wed (Towbin et al., 2003).

This conclusion was evident in 15 movies, including *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast,* and *Mulan*. Despite Ariel's willful disobedience, it is evident that she

deeply loves her father. The only person she seems to love more is Eric, whom, to the third-wavers' dismay, she falls in love with at first sight (Henke et al., 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). Belle also follows Disney's typical female role. Like Ariel, she also loves her father very much and sacrifices her freedom for his. Belle claims she wants adventure, and apparently the fulfillment of this adventure was found in falling in love with the Beast (Henke et al., 1996). While a romantic relationship is implied at the end of *Mulan*, Mulan's domesticity is not easily overlooked (Towbin et al., 2003). The film begins and ends at her home, and it is to protect her family's honor that she enlists in the Chinese army (Youngs, 1999).

Henke et al. (1996) represents feminist ideology most clearly when she states,

> We also find it disquieting to witness adventurous and interesting role models like Ariel and Belle inevitably succumbing to the dominant heterosexual, patriarchal notion that, in the final analysis, satisfaction is defined not by self-knowledge, being, or accomplishments, but by a role prescribed through marriage (p. 247).

While Pocahontas does not follow Disney's traditional script of ending in marriage, feminists state that she does fit into Towbin et al.'s (2003) categorization that women are domestic and likely to wed. Although, the wording of the theme must change. Pocahontas is domestic, but is not likely to wed; however, she is likely to fall in love with a complete stranger that speaks a foreign language (Dundes, 2001; Towbin et al., 2003).

According to Dundes (2001), Pocahontas' rejection of marriage to Kocoum and John Smith is not necessarily a sign of empowerment. This thought contradicts most feminist scholars who rejoice in Pocahontas' selfhood (Henke, 1996). When Pocahontas decides she will stay with her tribe, as opposed to following John, she is asserting her domestic role as nurturer. Society teaches mothers that it is important to sacrifice all of

their desires on behalf of their family. Therefore, Pocahontas's decision to stay actually portrays her transition into stereotypical womanhood—from an egocentric lifestyle to one as a domestic nurturer (Dundes, 2001).

Finally, third-wave feminists critique Disney's traditional view that women are the rescued and men are the rescuers. Although each of the female protagonists in this study at some point saves her male counterpart's life, Ariel and Belle must also be rescued by males (Towbin et al., 2003).

King Triton and Eric rescue Ariel from Ursula's curse. When Ariel trades her voice to become a human, she signs a conditional agreement that says that if Eric does not kiss her by the third day, then her soul will be Ursula's. And it is. On the third day, Ursula claims Ariel as her prize; however, King Triton intervenes. He bargains with the sea monster to trade places with his beloved daughter. Then, Eric slays the giant octopus, releasing everyone that is under Ursula's curse, including King Triton.

Likewise, when Belle flees from the enchanted castle, she is attacked by a pack of wolves. The Beast sweeps in and defends Belle and fights off the animals. Also, further into the film, Belle and Maurice are locked in their cellar, and it is Chip, the little teacup, that uses Maurice's invention to set them free.

Summary of Feminist Analysis: Patriarchal Oppression. Third-wave feminists fight actively against stereotypes and seek to destroy patriarchy in society. Inspired by one of the leading suffragettes, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, they accuse male dominance for enslaving women and for "systematically denying women the skills and rights to exist as sovereign selves" (Henke, 1996, p. 235). Therefore, their heightened attention makes them aware of Disney's flaws. The final element of critique is the presence of patriarchal

oppression in the lives of Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan. For the purposes of this study, patriarchal oppression is defined as a male-dominated society that subjugates woman to a position of inferiority.

Gillian Youngs (1999) indicts Disney for the formation of worlds that were created *by* men. She states that if Disney has full ability to design worlds from scratch, then it should not be bound by societal standards. Therefore, it should strive to break conventional molds and make a world built by women (Youngs, 1999). The implications of this patriarchal society vary from movie to movie, yet no matter the degree, there are repercussions.

In *The Little Mermaid*, for example, Ariel lives in a male-dominated society (Henke et al., 1996). While she has many sisters, they do not play significant roles in the film. She has no mother, but she does have two male companions, Flounder and Sebastian, which constantly help her navigate life (Henke et al., 1996). Furthermore, the symbolism of Ariel sacrificing her voice to be with the man she loves is outraging to third-wave feminists (Henke et al., 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). This action shows the insignificance of her curiosity, opinions, and identity (Henke et al., 1996; Towbin et al., 2003). Finally, Ariel fulfills the stereotypical role of patriarchal society by finding the fulfillment of her dreams in marriage (Henke et al., 1996).

Belle also lives in a highly male-populated world. Like Ariel, she has no mother or significant female mentor and falls in love with a man (Henke et al., 1996; Craven, 2002). However, her love for her father is deep and real. Feminists do not know how to interpret Belle's self-sacrifice for Maurice. Some praise it for showing strength, while others criticize her for "relinquish[ing] her selfhood" and submitting to the patriarchy

(Henke et al., 1996, p. 238). As discussed later with Pocahontas, sacrifice can be shown as a weakness and a yielding to oppression.

Another area of significant concern for third-wave feminists is the existence of domestic abuse within *Beauty and the Beast* (Craven, 2002, Towbin et al., 2003). When Belle first agrees to be the Beast's prisoner, he sends Maurice away, exhibits his rage repeatedly, and then refuses to feed her dinner until she complies with his wishes (Ashman et. al, 1991; Towbin et al., 2003). Belle subjects herself to this patriarchal oppression for a period of time. However, throughout the course of the film, the Beast changes his disposition. Because of this, Belle falls in love with him.

Another questionable circumstance of domestic abuse does not deal with Belle and the Beast but with two enchanted objects—the feather duster and Lumiere, the candlestick. When Lumiere makes romantic advances towards the feather duster, she says "No, no, no," but he replies, "Yes, yes, yes" (Ashman et. al, 1991). This possibly reinforces a cultural assumption of male dominance and female subordination (Towbin et al., 2003). Feminists are afraid that these situations will teach young women that they should stay in abusive relationships.

Pocahontas and Mulan also live in a repressive patriarchal society; however, the consequences are more complex than for the previous characters. When discussing Pocahontas' role as nurturer, Dundes (2001) states that that action was a sacrifice that confined her to her stereotypical role. That self-sacrifice goes much deeper and penetrates the heart of this dialogue about oppressive male-dominance.

In postmodern, third-wave American culture, young girls are encouraged to have fun, be curious, and be independent. However, around the age of ten, they begin to

understand that their true duty is to "repress their feelings—to become selfless, not selfish" as they mature (Dundes, 2001, p. 357). This transition from selfish to selfless living is portrayed in Pocahontas when she chooses to stay with her tribe, succumbing to the patriarchal culture. Feminists argue that Pocahontas' decision to conform to society "shows that ultimately she will now rely on others' approval for self-validation while her sense of individuality will become subsumed within a web of bonds in her community" (Dundes, 2001, p. 360). So, ultimately, Pocahontas' acceptance of the oppressive patriarchal society causes more suppression of her individual self as she seeks her community's approval.

While many acclaim Mulan for breaking traditional gender stereotypes, Youngs (1999) argues that she actually submits to conventional values. Mulan, like Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas, lives in a "man's world" (p.313). Third-wave feminists love her spirit, ingenuity, and courage to enter the military; however, they are concerned with the context in which she does this. She dresses up like a man in order to be respected, since Mulan cannot enlist on behalf of her father as "Mulan" but must become "Ping" (Coats, 1998). Although she certainly is heroic and saves the nation of China as a woman, it is because she proved her worth as a male warrior. In fact, when Mulan learns of the final attack of the Huns, she tries to warn Captain Shang, but he is so disgusted by her actions that he refuses to acknowledge her counsel (Coats, 1998).

Finally, third-wave feminists note that Disney portrays Mulan within domestic, relational boundaries. The film begins and ends with her at home. She enlists in the military to bring honor to her family and to protect her father. She simply hopes to find her identity in the process.

Results

Does Disney reflect Third Wave feminist values in its definition of womanhood?

The first objective of this research was to analyze Disney's female protagonists to determine if they illustrate third wave feminist values. After conducting a search of feminist critiques as well as evaluating the content of the four films, it has been concluded that Disney reflects some third wave ideals. These ideals are independence and multiculturalism.

However, Disney deviates from third wave concepts by portraying all of the female protagonists as beautiful, domestic, and nurturing. Furthermore, the movies are scripted within a male-dominated society. This clashes with radical third wave goals of creating a matriarchal world.

How did Disney portray womanhood to Generation Y during childhood?

The lessons. The second question that this study sought to answer was, "How did Disney portray womanhood to members of Generation Y when they were children?" This research indicates that Disney illustrates four lessons about womanhood:

1. Women are equal to men.
2. Women are different from men.
3. Women ought to practice sacrificial love.
4. Women should follow their hearts.

Women are equal to men. The first message that Disney portrays to Generation Y about womanhood is that women are equal to men. For the purposes of this study, equality is defined as the state of likeness to a counterpart in nature, value, and ability. Disney teaches people that men and women are the alike in their humanity and worth and also are capable of doing the same things. This similarity is evidenced in *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas,* and *Mulan* by the female protagonists

abilities to make their own decisions, to have unique personalities, to be independent from society, and to contribute to their community.

As feminist reviews state, Disney's depiction of the independence of women shifts significantly during the late 1980s. Up until this point, a male was the only character that possessed control over his future. However, beginning with Ariel, Disney illustrates that a female is no longer a spineless victim of fate as were Cinderella, Aurora, and Snow White. She can be feisty and curious and can make up her own mind. Ariel determines she will be a part of the human world. Belle chooses to dismiss Gaston's marriage proposal. Pocahontas resolves to save John Smith's life. Mulan decides to join the army and fight in her father's place. By highlighting these traits within women, Disney shows men and women's equality in their ability to make decisions.

The female's feistiness, curiosity, and strong will demonstrate that, like men, there is not one specific mold that fit all women. People are diverse—no matter their gender. Like Belle, some women love to read just as some men love to read. Like Ariel, some women are stubborn just as some men are stubborn. Like Mulan, some women are courageous just as some men are courageous. Disney teaches that men and women do not necessarily fit into stereotypes. Not all women are soft spoken and dainty nor are all men brawny and daring. Men and women are the same only in their vast ranges of temperaments, interests and personalities.

Not only does Disney teach that women are equal to men in having unique personalities, but Disney also demonstrates that women are comparable men in their ability to be independent from societal standards. Like men, women are not obligated to abide by the norms set by the community or culture. Third-wave feminists point out that

Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan rebel against society, and they are right. While these characters live in a world that primarily values their outer beauty, none of them yields to the pressure to define herself by it. Each of these young women knows, or learns, that her identity is not found externally but internally. Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas seem to possess a sense of confident selfhood from the start of the films that does not waver. Even though, Mulan struggles when she is not affirmed to be a suitable wife by the Matchmaker, and the story, in part, is a tale of her quest to find who she really is. Ultimately, she realizes that she should not seek for others' opinion to determine her identity (Coats et. al, 1998).

Finally, Disney shows that women are like men in that they can make significant contributions to their society. The two most apparent examples of this message are found in Pocahontas and Mulan. Through getting to know the Englishmen, specifically John Smith, Pocahontas is able to teach her tribe about the value of humankind, no matter their race. Before her father can execute John, Pocahontas boldly lays herself on top of him. She says that if they plan to kill him, they will have to kill her as well. At the climax of the film, Pocahontas proclaims, "I love him, Father. Look around you. This is where the path of hatred has brought us. This is the path I choose, Father. What will yours be?" (Ashman et. al, 1995). She shows both the Englishmen and her Indian tribe what it means to embrace diversity.

To state that Mulan makes a contribution to her society would be an understatement. Not only does she teach her society how a woman can truly bring honor to her family, but most importantly Mulan saves the emperor and the nation of China from the attacks of the Huns. In battle, Mulan proves herself to be a creative, spunky, and

brave warrior. Dressed as a man, she gains the respect of her fellow comrades in fighting. After her identity is revealed, the men are disgusted that they have been battling beside a female; however, when the Huns attack the palace, they quickly learn that women have the ability to fight as well as a man. After Mulan saves the emperor and the nation, all of the hundreds of people in the palace bow to her to show her honor (Coats et. al, 1998). She truly makes a contribution to her society.

Women are different from men. While *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas,* and *Mulan* demonstrate that women are similar to men, this study identified that Disney also portrays the message that women are different from men. Both women and men are priceless and unique human beings; however, there are overall distinctions that characterize each gender. Third-wave feminists tend to identify Disney's portrayal of difference as a perpetuation of gender stereotypes. This study concludes that this is not the case. The gender stereotypes classified by third-wavers are not merely stereotypes but are truly inherent gender differences.

The feminists critique Disney's womanhood by saying that the image of the perfect young woman is always tender, compassionate, beautiful, and virginal (Henke et al., 1996). However, it must be noted that typically there is a tenderness and compassion that is ingrained into the nature of women. It might not always be expressed, but women are more prone to display gentleness or sensitivity than are men. They also naturally make decisions more heavily based on emotions and relationships. This does not reflect an inequality in nature, value, or ability but does portray a difference in gender roles.

As a whole, women are domestic and nurturing creatures, and Disney shows this in Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan. While Ariel disobeys her father to experience the

human world, her deep love for her father is unmistakable when he saves her from giving her soul to Ursula (Ashman et. al, 1989). Belle not only possesses a sincere love for her father, but she also assumes a nurturing role to Chip and to the Beast when he is hurt from the wolves' attack. She tends to his wounds and takes care of him (Ashman et. al, 1991). As third-wavers reveal in their analysis, Pocahontas' loyalty to her tribe at the end of the film highlights her domestic and nurturing role (Dundes, 2001; Pentecost et. al, 1995). Finally, Mulan is motivated by emotions and by her relationship with her family to join the Chinese army. She is searching for her identity, is fearful for her father, and is compelled to bring honor to her family (Coats et. al, 1998). This simply reflects how different genders tend to respond to situations.

Women ought to practice sacrificial love. This study discovered a third message that Disney portrays about womanhood: women ought to practice sacrificial love. In all four of the films analyzed for this research, the female protagonist sacrifices her body, freedom, life, or even her love for someone or something she loves most. Ariel sacrifices her voice and her fin, as well as her father's wishes, in order to win the love of Eric (Ashman et al., 1989). Belle sacrifices her freedom and agrees to be the Beast's prisoner in order to save her father, Maurice (Ashman et. al, 1991). Pocahontas sacrifices her life to save John Smith and also her love for John in order to stay with her community (Pentecost et. al, 1995). Mulan sacrifices her life to become a warrior because of her love for her father, her family, her country, and even herself (Coats et. al, 1998).

This message of womanhood is the most problematic to feminists. Since the second wave, feminists have held to the belief that women should not create emotional ties to anyone or anything. They claim that these ties put women in bondage, prohibiting

them to blossom to their full potential because women will have to make sacrifices in order to maintain the relationships—even if it is for a greater good (SDSU, 2006). They argue that Mulan should not have joined the army out of love her for family nor should Pocahontas sacrifice her happiness to stay with her people (Dundes, 2001; Youngs, 1999).

However, Disney teaches the value of both men and women making sacrifices for the people and things they love. Ironically, it is when one sacrifices one's self in an act of love that true freedom comes. It promotes a sense of humility and selflessness to accomplish a task for a greater good. Because of its equal treatment of genders, Disney does not support the idea that sacrifice is the sole responsibility of females. Men and women make significant sacrifices in the films. Most evidently, King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* trades places with Ariel when Ursula comes to take her soul, and so in turn, she takes his. In the battle that follows, King Triton is released; however, it was his selfless act that teaches a very valuable lesson about what true love is (Ashman et. al, 1989).

Women should follow their hearts. This study identified the final message that Disney demonstrates the lesson that women should follow their hearts. Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan make decisions based on feelings and instinct and tend to do what they want to do despite other opinion— in other words, they follow their hearts.

This message is embedded within almost all of the previous messages. It is similar to the feminist analysis of the themes of independence, feistiness, emotions-based decision-making, as well as the theme of rebellion. Through Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas and Mulan, Disney illustrates the idea that women should pursue the things they desire. There is no cost that should get in the way. For example, Ariel sacrificed her relationship with

her father, her voice, her fin, and all she has ever known in order to become human to win Eric's heart (Ashman et. al, 1989). Furthermore, Mulan decides to join the army despite the consequences for herself and for her family (Coats et. al, 1998).

While Ariel and Mulan demonstrate following their heart by having a singular goal that they pursue, Belle and Pocahontas show the message of following their heart through the way they make decisions. These two characters primarily utilize their instinct and emotions to determine what to do in a situation. When Belle and the Beast argue after he discovers her in the West Wing, Belle flees from the castle to go home, despite her agreement to stay in the castle forever (Ashman et. al, 1991). Furthermore, Pocahontas listens to the spirits of the wind and also to her heart to decide to rebel against her tribe to spend time with an Englishman. She is also prompted by the spirits at the end of the movie to save John Smith's life (Pentecost et. al, 1995).

These are not decisions that have been logically thought through but are decisions that are made in a moment. They reflect the young woman's true desires. Disney teaches that the best way to live life is to follow one's heart, because in the end, everything works out for Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan.

Discussion

This study was conducted in order to understand the depiction of womanhood portrayed to Generation Y women during childhood. Therefore, it is imperative to discuss the implications the results of this research in regards to Generation Y. As stated previously in the Generation Y section, this generation is known for their diversity, independence, and empowerment (NAS, 2006). Furthermore, sociological research indicates that the women of this generation are less traditional than previous generations

(A Portrait, 2007). That does not mean that Generation Y women disregard the importance of family, but they look at their lives with a mentality of having it all—careers, love, family, and independence.

In conclusion, during the late 1980s through the 1990s, Disney portrayed four lessons to Generation Y about womanhood that corresponds with that generation's modern outlook. No exact conclusion can be made that Disney's portrayal of womanhood formed this breed of young women. However, it is reasonable to state that Disney's messages portrayed to Generation Y when they were children about femininity correspond with the view the generation itself upholds today. Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas and Mulan illustrated that while women are equal to men, they are also different from men. They demonstrate the importance of sacrificial love. They model what it looks like to pursue one's desires. Likewise, females of Generation Y are independent and strong. Generation Y women are empowered to make a difference in their society, even if it means making significant personal sacrifices. This is because they will go the distance to achieve their goal. Lastly, these women want to experience love through a close family relationship, but that is not necessarily their primary objective as it has been in the previous generations.

Often, one thinks about the impact or prevalence of feminism within today's society as being relatively small. In people's minds, it is a movement that is nearly dead. However, as seen in this study, feminist principles infiltrate society more widely than it is realized, and its impact is significant. Mary Kassian (2005) summed up this entire discussion her book, *The Feminist Mistake:*

> Most young women regard feminism as yesterday's fashion—an antiquated philosophy that hangs neglected like the hippie beads in the back of their mothers'

closets. But the philosophy of feminism has not died. Rather, it has been thoroughly incorporated into our collective societal psyche. The radical has become commonplace. Hollywood's image of women as "kick-butt" female tomb raiders, terminatrixes, and trash-talking-machine-gun-toting mercenaries do not raise our collective eyebrows. Virtually all of us—to one degree or another—have become feminists. (p. 12)

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